

The Real Fundamentals of Christianity

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There is sound evidence that, after a period of neglect of theoretical and theological questions, Christian people are once more beginning to realize the truth of Emanuel Swedenborg's statement that "The Church is according to its doctrine." One of the leading religious periodicals in a recent issue speaks disparagingly of those who say that "beliefs are not important," and who urge the churches to forget them and unite in works of social service. It continues: "Soon something about it breaks. We have the experience repeatedly of seeing the old questions of God, Life, Destiny, Salvation come back. They will not down." The bitter warfare between so-called Fundamentalists and Modernists in all the churches is supreme evidence that the attempt to ignore beliefs has been a failure.

On the whole this is something to be thankful for. While it would be a grievous tragedy for the churches to go back to the old mistake of giving rightness of belief supremacy over right living, it must nonetheless always be true of man that "as he thinks in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7). Belief (as distinct from mere profession) may not be the substance of which character is built, but nevertheless it decides the form that character will take. No man can possibly be better than his ideals, and if these be false his character will be proportionately misshapen. But ideals are beliefs, and are formed from our

fundamental thoughts about religion. It is right, therefore, to assert, as do the Fundamentalists, that the basic ideas and beliefs of Christianity cannot be lost without disaster to the Christian Church and to the world.

But what are these fundamentals? Have there been, at least until fairly recently, broad, basic principles upon which Christian thinking rested, and about which Christians, though they might have differences in regard to minor matters, were substantially agreed? And if so, have these principles been truly Christian? Have they expressed what Jesus Christ himself taught, or have they represented a progressively evolved tradition that not only added to and expanded the real teaching of Jesus, but in certain instances quite definitely contradicted it?

It is on this last point that we believe the New Church can make an illuminating contribution to the controversy. The doctrines made known (as it holds) not *by* but *through* Emanuel Swedenborg accept Christ's teaching unequivocally as the basis and the starting point of Christian thinking. They maintain only that Christ's teaching has been overlaid with wrong interpretations, and that thus traditional Christianity ceased long ago to represent its Founder truly. Hence this Church holds that the right way to know the fundamentals of Christianity is not to consider what men in the past have thought Christ's teaching meant, but to examine that teaching in its own light, and in the light of the reason that God gives to all men who sincerely want to know his truth.

But what are the accepted and traditional "fundamentals," and wherein are they at variance with real Christianity? A statement has been drawn up by a group of the Fundamentalist leaders, including representatives of the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago, the Wylie School of Bible Training of New York, and others, in which Fundamentalism and Modernism are opposed in parallel columns. The beliefs that the statement credits to the Modernists might arouse controversy--indeed, Modernism is so highly individualistic that it would be hard to obtain full agreement among its adherents upon any statement, but the asserted "fundamentals" do seem to us to express a fairly true view of traditional Christianity, Catholic and Protestant alike. For, as the Fundamentalists admit, they "have more in common with Roman Catholics than they have with Liberals." It may accordingly be useful to examine the Fundamentalist statement in detail.

1. The first article of the Fundamentalist platform is that "The Bible *is* the Word of God" (as opposed to the Modernist view that it "*contains* the Word of God"). This statement, from the New Church point of view, is unassailable. Jesus said, "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life" (John 6:63). Swedenborg says that "The Holy Scripture or Word is divine truth itself" (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* #1) and that "by means of the sense of the letter of the Word there is conjunction with the Lord and association with the angels" (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* #62).

But when we say, "The Bible is the Word of God," what do we mean? The Fundamentalist says he means that the Word is "literally infallible"--by which he implies

that every statement in it may be taken literally and is literally true. The world actually was created in six days; Joshua really made the sun and moon stand still, and so on. The important difficulty with such a position is not that it is scientifically inaccurate, but that it is logically untenable. Scientific teaching, however fully it may seem to have been demonstrated, remains always questionable. There may have been wrong conclusions from phenomena observed, or these themselves may have been incomplete. But no sane man can believe or assert that two contradictory statements are both literally true, and the Bible contradicts itself repeatedly. Thus in a single chapter of the first book of Samuel (chapter 15), we have the directly conflicting statements: "He is not a man that he should repent" (1 Samuel 15:29), and "The Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Samuel 15:35). Nor are the contradictions confined to mere words. Parts of the Bible tell us of a God who is pure love, who "is kind to the unthankful and to the evil" (Luke 6:35), while others picture him as "angry with the wicked every day" (Psalm 7:11). When, therefore, a man says he believes the Bible literally, he can mean only that he accepts literally those portions of it that fit in with his predilections and his preconceived ideas.

Belief in the literal infallibility of Scripture is not a real Christian fundamental at all. There is not a shred of evidence that the Bible itself ever makes any such claim. Externally the Bible may be history in certain portions, but it is also legend, parable, drama, poetry--practically every form of literature known to man. To base belief in Jonah, for example, on the book's historic veridicity is as unwarranted and insincere as to judge *Hamlet's* literary value by the fact of its hero's having been an actual character. Jesus himself not only made no statement that the Scriptures were infallible; he continually modified and corrected them. Take for example the reiterated contrasts in the Sermon on the Mount: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, . . . but I say unto you" (Matthew 5:21-22; 27-28). Or take his statement in regard to Moses' teaching on divorce--his explanation of the ethical imperfection of the literal command: "For the hardness of your heart he wrote you this precept" (Mark 10:5).

Just *because* it is the Word of God, the Divine Scripture is not planned primarily to teach science, history, or even morals. It is given to provide the spiritual principles underlying life's externals--to show, not in what form, but in what spirit man should live. Hence in each period it takes the point of view on outward things then current, and seeks to infuse in men who hold that point of view a higher and more spiritual purpose. Like Jesus, it speaks to the multitudes in parables, the inner meanings of which may be studied for long ages yet to come. One of the supreme contributions of Emanuel Swedenborg to religious thinking was his revelation of the fact that the parabolic character of Scripture is not casual or arbitrary, but is based on fixed laws of symbolism that inhere in the nature of the universe and of man. The Bible's symbolism may thus be the subject of exact and scientific study, and such study reveals within and behind literal inconsistencies a "continuous spiritual sense" or meaning, perfectly consistent from the first book of Genesis to the last of Revelation. On the recognition of this fact, not on blind faith or dogmatic assertion, hangs the preservation of belief in the Bible as the veritable Word of God.

2. It is asserted as a second fundamental that "Jesus Christ is *the* Son of God in a sense in which *no* other is." Here our good Fundamentalist friends are right, but have not carried their idea to its conclusion. Jesus was, as he claimed to be, the Son of God, but for that very reason he was and is God himself. Infinity can never be divided. How, then, can God who is infinite bestow part of his infinity upon another Being? To think this is to hold the illogical and anti-Scriptural idea of two gods--to step back, as Mohammedans say the Christians have, from monotheism to polytheism.

"I, even I, am God and beside me there is no Savior" (Isaiah 43:11). It was the Supreme God himself who came into the world as Jesus Christ, who lived man's life as a man that he might meet all our difficulties and overcome them. From his human mother he put on a human nature, and along with it a consciousness that was for the time being separate from his infinite one. In this he fought our battles and won his great victory for us. By meeting every human issue in a divine way he gradually put off all the finite elements of his inheritance, till at last he became consciously the God he had been all along unconsciously, and could say--as no one but God or a madman would dare say--"All power is given unto me in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18).

3. It follows from this that the New Church accepts without reservation the third fundamental, that "The birth of Jesus was *supernatural*." But "supernatural" does not mean unnatural. None of nature's laws were violated in the birth of Jesus without any human father. Nature's laws, indeed, cannot be violated, for they are the laws of God himself. The birth of Jesus may be called "miraculous," if we take St. Augustine's old definition of a miracle as "an act or effect going far beyond human knowledge, but not against the laws of God." And it is only a very shallow scientist who will say nowadays that anything is impossible except that law shall be violated.

We know at least one law that would be violated if we took Jesus Christ to be the son of Joseph: the law of heredity. That the great Leader and Teacher of mankind should have been the son of those whom certain Modernists assert to have been his parents is beyond reasonable credence; it would be if anything a greater miracle than the Virgin Birth itself. Moreover, to assert this is to rob his life of its central and eternal meaning, and to reduce his religion to the level of Buddhism or Confucianism. The man who can discern no fundamental difference between Jesus Christ and Buddha has let theory rob him of his spiritual insight beyond the point where one can profitably argue with him. Jesus Christ's deity is something logic cannot prove or disprove; millions of souls who have experienced his love and power offer the only evidence that, in a case like this, is worth considering. Multitudes of lives have felt the influence of Buddha's teaching, but to whose soul has *Buddha*--the man, not the teaching--brought new birth and a remade and rejuvenated life?

4. "The death of Jesus," say the Fundamentalists, "was *expiatory*." Again we ask what they mean. Where in the Gospels can we find a hint of the vengeful Deity whose wrath against his creatures found an outlet in inflicting suffering and death upon his only Son? The thought is so utterly monstrous--such a blasphemy against all Jesus ever taught about the Heavenly Father--that one only wonders how it ever could have been imported into a religion so uncongenial to it as Christianity. Paul knew better. He said, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (1 Corinthians 5:19).

God put on human nature so that he might meet and overcome all the spiritual foes of man--both the whole body of false and selfish thinking that the ages had developed and the force of all evil personalities in this world and in that of the "departed." He had to become man before he could do this, because in his proper Person he was unassailable by evil. Through the human personality he took on from Mary every phase of evil could and did attack him, and was overthrown. As a result of this he gained a new means to help and save whoever seeks his aid. His death upon the cross was not the primary object of his coming, but the carrying of that object to its logical conclusion: complete self-forgetfulness; the conquest of the last surviving trace of selfishness in his inherited humanity. With this his human nature as such perished, and its place was taken by a Divine Human nature, one in consciousness with God and the sole rightful object of all Christian love and worship.

5. Man, so the Scriptures say, was made "in God's image and according to his likeness" (Genesis 1:26, 27); but they do not tell us except figuratively how creation was accomplished. The Fundamentalists say, "Man is the product of *special creation*"--deprecating the idea of evolution. The New Church says that man is the purpose of the universe. All that is, is in order that God may have beings whom he may love and who may be united with him by returning his love. As it is put by Swedenborg, "The Divine Providence has as its end a heaven from the human race" (*Divine Providence* #27). Man is a spirit, but during his life on earth that spirit dwells within an earthly body fashioned from the substance of the material world. In just what way this body was prepared for him, whether at once or by a gradual process such as that now known as evolution, it is not the function of religion to reveal. God's working in the world of matter may be traced and should be traced by studying that world. All we know from religion is that he moves always in due order, building from the lower to the higher. As to the material facts of evolution, the Church has no right to dogmatize. Should the truth of these facts, however, be established, as most educated people think it has been, there is nothing in it to shake faith in God or his creation.

6. "Man is a *sinner*, fallen from original righteousness, and, apart from God's redeeming grace, is hopelessly lost." This, the sixth "fundamental," rightly interpreted, is a true statement. God, desiring man to love him, could not gain that love except by giving man free will; for love must be free or it is not love at all. But man, possessing free will, had

the power to refuse to return God's love, and did refuse. Sin came because man preferred self-reliance to the recognition of his life as God's gift. But since without God man could not even live at all, still less live as God wills he should, he certainly is "lost" without God's grace. And this the more because, while sin and guilt can never be inherited, a tendency to evil can be; and man now inherits tendencies to evil from all his innumerable ancestors. To balance this, God put and keeps in man a "better nature" or a tendency to goodness, whereby each man's freedom to choose between good and evil is maintained. This "better nature" is not part of man, however; it is God within him, and man of himself is wholly evil. But God never leaves man to himself, and so salvation remains always possible for all who will accept it.

7. The means of salvation are thus stated by the Fundamentalists: "Man is justified by *faith* in the atoning blood of Christ. Result: supernatural regeneration from *above*." If this means that a man is saved by the mere recognition of the fact that Christ died for him, it is an entirely unscriptural and unchristian statement. Christ told the lawyer that he would be saved if he loved God and his neighbor (Matthew 22:35-40; Luke 10:25-28). He said again, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35). Indeed as far back as the time of the prophet Micah it could be said, "What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8). In other words, mere recognition of a truth, however vital that truth may be, can have no redeeming power. Man is what he believes "in his heart"; but such belief is shown, not by his words, but by his works.

It is true, on the other hand, that good works alone do not redeem man, and that he may do good works from entirely unregenerate motives. God alone can save man, and he does this as man, looking to him, tries to live as he would have him, in act and thought and motive. Salvation is thus "from above" in that without God no man can be saved. But it is also "from within," as say the Modernists, because regeneration is the growth and development of the "better nature" that God put and keeps within us, yet that really is not ours but his. Regeneration or salvation is thus "supernatural," and still wholly normal and according to God's laws, since for this purpose man was made in the beginning.

The fact is that the real fundamentals of Christianity are less narrow and less complicated than our friends would have us think. They are quite few and simple, yet the study and the practice of them will give occupation to the thoughts and lives of men through all the ages. Swedenborg says, "There are three essentials of the Church: an acknowledgment of the Divine of the Lord, an acknowledgment of the holiness of the Word, and the life that is called charity." And he adds, "If the Church had held these three as essentials it would not have been divided, but only varied by its intellectual dissensions, as light varies its color in beautiful objects, and as contrasting diadems give added beauty to a kingly crown" (*Divine Providence* #259).

In recognition of this fact lies the hope of Christian unity and Christian progress. On this basis and on this alone can the Lord keep his promise and effect his Second Coming in the hearts and lives of men.